

**Offenders make case for drug court**  
It's 'graduation day' for two who turned their lives around

By [DON PLUMMER](#)  
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution  
Published on: 10/13/04

Andrew Theriot, then a teenager, was well on his way to a lifetime of trouble when he was arrested two years ago for illegal possession of prescription narcotics.

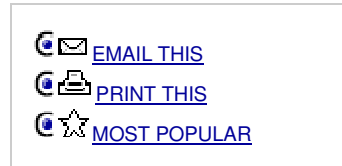
He was facing hard jail time when his lawyer suggested an alternative.



Phil Skinner/AJC

[\(ENLARGE\)](#)

Andrew Theriot, a former high school dropout, says drug court 'gave me a life I really didn't dream was possible.'



"I already had some smaller charges for possessing marijuana and having a concealed weapon," Theriot said this week. "I've been using drugs since I was 14 and almost had no family life."

So Theriot, at age 19, said he jumped at the chance to enter a program designed to steer nonviolent drug offenders away from the lifeline of Cobb County's drug treatment court.

Today, after two years in the strict program, Theriot is being recognized as one of the first two graduates at a ceremony at Cobb County Superior Court.

Cobb's drug court, one of 23 in Georgia (DeKalb and Fulton counties have similar programs), isn't just focused on treating drug offenders, said administrator Kristie Garrett. Its primary aim is to reduce the long-term public costs of illegal drug use and the crime it spawns.

"Many of these people don't have any life skills except drug use," said Garrett, a licensed addiction counselor.

Theriot, now 21, has done more than learn how to avoid drugs, Garrett said. He keeps appointments and chooses friends who won't lure him back into the spiral that left him with "no car, no money, and sleeping outside."

But, said Garrett, "this isn't a 'hug-a-thug' approach." Be 15 minutes late for a drug screening and you can go to jail. Forgetting an appointment also can draw jail time. Repeated failures get you tossed out of the program, no appeals or delays.

Brice Thompson, 30, will graduate with Theriot today. Thompson said he started drinking at age 14, taking drugs at 16 and out of trouble until, at age 28, he faced felony drug charges and a long time in jail.

One of the first participants in Cobb's drug court, Thompson said he has not had a drink or taken a drug since Oct. 25, 2002, the night he was arrested.

"I love the new life I've been given," he said.

Cobb Superior Court Judge George Kreeger, who oversees the drug court, said the model used in Cobb already has proved successful in Florida and New York, but isn't for everyone.

"They've got to be willing to follow a very strict regimen," said Kreeger. "At first most can't stay clean, show up on time and keep a job or be in school."

The intensive program includes frequent and random drug testing, strict supervision, and counseling, all closely monitored by Kreeger.

Those who follow the rules move through increasingly independent levels for two years to graduation, when they will have their charges erased from their records. There are now 82 in the program.

The screening of applicants is rigorous. So far, 52 people have been rejected and 17 have washed out.

Theriot said when he entered the program he was "pretty desperate and willing to try anything," but that he didn't really understand what he was getting into.

"I was expecting to be like the other rehab programs I had been in and out of for years," he said. "But this was completely different. The structure, the discipline, the counselors, the drug tests, having to go to court every Monday."

Now a student at Georgia Perimeter College, Theriot was a dropout who has graduated from high school since his arrest. He has a full-time job and lives independently, things he said he was not able to do while on drugs. But the court didn't make him sober up, he said.

"The program showed me the way to AA, and that's where I got sober," he said. "This Christmas Eve will be two years."

Unlike many other courts, which primarily focus on moving cases through the system, drug treatment courts aim to break the cycle of addiction, according to the National Drug Court Institute.

More than 400,000 people have participated in drug court programs since the first court opened in Miami in 1989.

There are now about 1,500 in the country. There were only eight in Georgia when Cobb opened its drug court in 2002.

Nationally, a study by Columbia University's National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse found the average repeat-offender rate for drug court graduates is between 4 percent and 10 percent. The study found that 48 percent of drug offenders not attending drug court were later rearrested.

Kreeger, a judge for nearly 26 years, said he has stayed with the program because of people like Theriot.

"He's made significant progress," Kreeger said. "He had a very long way to go, and if Andrew can do it, I know others can succeed."

Theriot said he has more than repaired his relationship with his parents.

"They're like my best friends now," he said.

The drug treatment court experience, Theriot said, taught him a lot about life.

"I've learned that no matter how horrible your life is or what you've done, it's never too late," he said. "The drug court gives you a chance to completely change your life. It gave me a life I didn't dream was possible."